

Cultural Intelligence

Working Successfully With Diverse Groups

When you're working in an international environment, you need to make a real effort to understand the cultural backgrounds, beliefs and attitudes of the people around you. If you don't, you'll struggle to get things done.

Some people - those with high "cultural intelligence" - are good at spotting cultural differences, and they adapt their behavior accordingly. This is a key skill when working with culturally diverse groups.

It's very possible to develop cultural intelligence. In this article, we'll look at what it is, and we'll see how to build it.



High cultural intelligence gives you a deeper insight into your international colleagues' working styles.

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Tip:

Common sense and sensitivity play an important role here. You may not immediately understand the reasons for a colleague's behavior, but you can build a great relationship if you keep a friendly manner and an open mind.

What Is Cultural Intelligence?

Christopher Earley and Soon Ang introduced the concept of cultural intelligence in their 2003 [book](#) of the same name. They define cultural intelligence as someone's ability to adapt successfully to a new cultural setting.

Cultural intelligence is related to [emotional intelligence](#), but it goes a step further. People with high *emotional* intelligence can pick up on the emotions, wants, and needs of others. Those with high *cultural* intelligence are attuned to the values, beliefs, attitudes, and body language of people from different cultures; and they use this knowledge to interact with empathy and understanding.

People with high cultural intelligence are not experts in every culture; rather, they use observation, empathy, and intelligence to read people and situations; and to make informed

decisions about why others are acting as they are.

They also use cultural intelligence to monitor their own actions. Instead of making quick judgments or relying on stereotypes, they observe what is happening, and they adapt their own behavior accordingly.

The Advantages of Cultural Intelligence

There are many reasons to develop cultural intelligence.

First, building cultural intelligence helps you work effectively with people who are different from you. Whether you're working abroad or leading a culturally diverse team, it can mean the difference between success and failure, and the difference between solving problems and creating them.

High cultural intelligence will also help you build rapport with a new team, adjust to a new department, or work well with a cross-functional team.

Last, high cultural intelligence is a predictor of strong job performance in a new culture. Research shows that professionals with high cultural intelligence are more successful in international assignments. They work more effectively with different groups, and they adjust more easily to living and working in the new culture.

Developing Cultural Intelligence

Anyone can improve their cultural intelligence. According to Dr David Livermore, an expert on cultural intelligence and author of the 2011 book "The Cultural Intelligence Difference," there are four things that contribute to it:

1. Drive.
2. Knowledge.
3. Strategy.
4. Action.

According to Livermore, you must develop each of these to be culturally intelligent. Let's look at how you can do this.

1. Drive

Drive is your motivation to learn about and adapt to a different culture. People who aren't interested in what shapes a particular culture are unlikely to adapt well to it.

But think of what happens when you make an effort to learn about this new culture. Your mind is open, and, instead of seeing difference as a difficulty, you see it as something that you want to learn about.

To strengthen your drive, make an effort to explore new cultures and communities. For example, try the following:

- Get to know people in different neighborhoods and social groups.
- Learn a [foreign language](#).
- Keep an open mind when talking to people who are different from you, whether they're from a different culture, ethnicity, political or ideological group, or simply a different organization.
- Volunteer for projects that put you in contact with different departments, organizations, or cultural groups.

Confidence is also important, because interacting with different cultures can be challenging. [Build self-confidence](#) by setting and achieving small goals, and by putting yourself into new situations.

2. Knowledge

Cultural knowledge isn't about learning a new culture inside out. Rather, it means learning about how culture in general shapes someone's behaviors, values, and beliefs.

To broaden your knowledge of this, start by learning about a culture that you're interested in, or that you're working with. Books such as [Do I Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands?](#) will give you a good overview of cultural differences, and you can also deepen your understanding by observing how people from different cultures behave.

Whenever possible, watch people from these different cultures interact. Pay careful attention to their body language. For example, do specific gestures and facial expressions mean different things to different people?

If you work with culturally diverse team members, use tools such as the [Seven Dimensions of Culture](#), [Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions](#), and [Wibbeke's Geoleadership Model](#) to understand what makes colleagues' cultures different. And research the significance of particular behaviors, beliefs, and rituals to understand the way that they are likely to affect your working relationships.

It's also important to learn about how a culture's history affects people's values and actions. Again, begin with a culture that interests you or with which you are familiar, and explore how past events drive current behavior.

Tip 1:

It's especially important to understand a country or region's history when relocating there, or when putting together a local team. Try to learn about the background of the region, nation, or ethnic group that you're going to interact with.

Even a basic understanding of past events can give you more of an insight into people's values and behaviors, and it will help you avoid obvious faux pas.

Tip 2:

Use our "[Managing in...](#)" series of articles to learn more about working in different countries.

3. Strategy

The "strategy" component of cultural intelligence describes the (often instinctive) planning that you do as a result of being culturally aware. It involves taking what you have learned from being aware of cultural differences, and making robust, culturally sensitive plans as a result.

This is actually quite simple - if you make a habit of thinking about cultural differences and their impacts, they will naturally feed into your planning.

There are several ways to build this habit into your daily life.

First, question your assumptions about why things happen differently in different cultures. Use a technique such as the [5 Whys](#) to get to the heart of what you're seeing or hearing.

Example:

- A colleague in [Japan](#) sends a polite reply to your email asking him to do something, but then doesn't start the task. *Why?*
- Your Japanese colleagues may consider that saying "No" is impolite. *Why?*
- This is part of their cultural heritage, which also applies in the business environment. *Why?*
- Japan's traditions have developed over thousands of years, and are deeply rooted in people's daily lives, including in the workplace. In addition, Japanese workers tend to identify strongly with their employers, and are unlikely to do something that could cause offense to colleagues and managers.

This example shows how an understanding of Japanese culture could help you to phrase requests in a different way in the future. It also shows how the concept of politeness differs across cultures. A manager who understands this would change the way that he asks people to do things, when working with colleagues in other cultures.

You can also improve your awareness of cultural interactions, whether at work or in public, or by studying local media, movies or magazine articles. This reveals new insights into how culture affects people's working lives.

Livermore suggests keeping a diary of your cultural observations, noting down your frustrations as well as your successes. You can then use your notes when you are solving cross-cultural challenges.

4. Action

The last part of cultural intelligence relates to how you behave, and, in particular, how well you adapt when things don't go according to plan.

Cross-cultural interactions won't always go smoothly, so it's helpful to be able to think on your feet, and to stay in control of your emotions.

Learn about business etiquette in the culture in which you're working; this will help you with the culture's social and business rituals, and it won't go unnoticed.

When observing a different culture, pay close attention to what people say and do. For example, explore their voice intonations, body language, and conversation style. This will give you a deeper understanding of them, and help you interact with them in a better way.

Key Points

Cultural intelligence is someone's ability to adapt to different cultures and to understand people's values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Culturally intelligent people can then use this information to communicate, collaborate, and negotiate with people from diverse backgrounds.

According to Dr David Livermore, an expert in cultural intelligence, it consists of four components:

1. Drive: Being motivated to learn about a new culture or setting.
2. Knowledge: Studying how culture shapes people's behaviors, values, and beliefs.
3. Strategy: Being able to factor culture into longer-term planning.
4. Action: Behaving in a culturally sensitive way - including being able to 'think on one's feet' in difficult situations.

Cultural intelligence is not innate: you can develop each of these components.

The term "culture" is often used as a synonym for nationality or ethnicity. However, it can also apply to different ideological or political groups, and to different organizations, age groups, or departments.

[References](#)

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A Final Note

There are so many good reasons to build **cultural intelligence**. Don't ignore it!

Next week, we're highlighting strategies for surviving in an inherently stressful job.

Best wishes!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

James Manktelow

[Email us](#)

Mind Tools

Essential Skills for an Excellent Career!

References

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